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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 002211

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SUBJECT: PRO-CHAVEZ PPT PARTY: GRUDGING SUPPORT FOR  
CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM

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Classified By: Acting Political Counselor Daniel Lawton,  
Reasons 1.4. (B) and (D)

11. (C) Summary. The small pro-Chavez party Patria Para Todos (PPT) is reluctantly supporting President Chavez's proposed, sweeping constitutional changes. PPT leaders told PolCouns that Chavez's constitutional package is a "tough sell" within Chavismo, and they predict that it will only narrowly win public approval in the December 2 referendum. PPT leaders are privately hoping that Chavez will moderate his positions in the face of what they perceive as growing internal resistance to his radicalism. They claimed PPT survived the worst of Chavez's criticism after the party declined to merge with Chavez's proposed United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). PPT leaders also said they want to maintain a discreet dialogue with the USG. PPT provided 12 percent of Chavez's vote total in the 2006 presidential elections, so even its tepid support for Chavez's constitutional package will help bolster the Venezuelan president's efforts to secure passage of his reform package. End Summary.

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Referendum: "Best Scenario is Chavez Loses"  
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12. (C) Patria Para Todos (PPT) Secretary General Jose Alborno, accompanied by PPT National Assembly Deputy Wilmer Iglesias and PPT Latin American Parliament member Gustavo Hernandez, hosted PolCouns and Poloff for breakfast November 14 at the party's Caracas headquarters. Before his fellow party members arrived, Alborno said he saw two referendum scenarios unfolding: Venezuelans turn down Chavez's proposed sweeping constitutional changes or voters narrowly approve the controversial reform package. Alborno confided that he secretly hopes voters reject the Chavez's constitutional

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changes, arguing such an electoral defeat would benefit his small pro-Chavez political party.

13. (C) Iglesias and Hernandez said Chavez's proposed constitutional changes are generating considerable concern within Chavismo. They predicted Chavez would only win approval for his reform package by a narrow margin. They also noted that Chavez is a fundamentally pragmatic politician and argued that he would likely temper his radicalism if he perceives that his electoral majority is eroding. (Note: The next day Chavez announced that he planned to enact "100 laws" after the December 2 referendum.

End Note). The PPT leaders also commented that Chavez's mid-November travel to the OPEC Summit in Saudi Arabia, Iran, France and Portugal is ill-timed.

¶4. (C) The PPT leaders confirmed that they are campaigning for approval of the constitutional referendum (Note: PPT's "Yes" slogan is "Reform for Everyone." End Note). They are not concerned about the elimination of presidential term limits because Chavez will still have to win re-election. However, they expressed disappointment that their proposal to eliminate term limits for all elected offices failed to generate support within Chavismo, which Albornozy attributed to "fear". The PPT leaders said they were pleased that some of their ideas -- public financing for political campaigns and a revision of some of the draconian provisions related to emergency rule, did get incorporated into the final proposal during National Assembly deliberations.

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Party Prospects  
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¶5. (C) Albornozy expressed optimism about PPT's political future. He acknowledged Chavez's vehement criticism of the party earlier in 2007 in the wake of PPT's decision not to join Chavez's proposed single pro-government party -- the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), but suggested "the worst is behind us." Albornozy and the other PPT leaders said they wanted to avoid the political fate of the small, pro-Chavez party Podemos, which they said "fell for Chavez's provocation." (Note: Chavez harshly criticized Podemos for declining to merge into the PSUV; Podemos openly opposes Chavez's constitutional reforms. End Note).

¶6. (C) Albornozy opined that Chavez's PSUV is still proving very divisive within Chavismo. He noted that almost as many voters still identify with Chavez's former Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) party as they do with the PSUV, according to local polls. Albornozy predicted that as many as seven PSUV

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members within the National Assembly will join PPT. With respect to former Defense Minister Baduel announcing his opposition to Chavez's constitutional reforms on November 4, Albornozy said the PPT disagrees with Baduel's position, but is defending Baduel's right to express his views.

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Dialogue with the USG  
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¶7. (C) Albornozy reiterated his interest in maintaining a frank -- and discreet -- dialogue with Embassy officials. He expressed an interest in meeting the Ambassador, but hastened to add, "after the referendum." PolCouns reviewed the USG's long-standing interest in renewing bilateral cooperation in areas of mutual interest, including counternarcotics cooperation. Iglesias expressed satisfaction that Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) seizures of cocaine are increasing. PolCouns noted that while increased BRV drug seizures are welcome, they also reflect that fact that the flow of illegal drugs through Venezuela has increased significantly in recent years. PolCouns stressed that the USG can be helpful to the BRV in counternarcotics, aviation, energy, and many other areas.

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Comment  
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¶8. (C) The PPT leaders' current optimism regarding Chavez moderating his behavior after the December 2 constitutional referendum may prove to be a very bad case of wishful thinking. After winning re-election in December 2006, Chavez almost immediately began announcing a series of measures, including reforming the constitution, that significantly

radicalized his government. Notwithstanding PPT leaders' hopes, there is no reason to doubt that Chavez will do the same in the wake of public approval of his constitutional referendum, whatever the margin of victory. Moreover, we expect Chavez and the PSUV to continue to put pressure on PPT members to join his single pro-government party, or like Podemos, risk being treated like an opposition party.

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